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AUTHOR McArthur, Leslie A.
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ABSTRACT

The author reports research documenting the tendency for actors to attribute their own behavior to external causes while observers attributed the same behaviors to the internal disposition of the actor. Psychologists, like other observers of behavior, may have a bias toward attributing an actor's behavior to internal causes, and their inferences about the causes of behavior may be most vulnerable to this observer attributional bias when the actor's behavior is very novel, or the actor's physical appearance is relatively atypical. Psychologists' inferences may be least vulnerable to observer attributional bias when the actor's behavior is rather unobtrusive or the actor's environment is particularly salient to the observer psychologist. (Author/LAA)

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SOME IMPLICATIONS OF OBSERVER ATTRIBUTIONAL BIASES FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE[1]

Leslie A. McArthur

Brandeis University

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The longstanding endeavor of psychologists to discover the causes of human behavior has taken an interesting twist during the past few years as a growing number of social psychologists have endeavored to discover the causes of people's beliefs about the causes of behavior. These efforts have produced a body of knowledge generally referred to as "attribution theory." There is as yet no monolithic theory of causal attribution, but several of the current conceptualizations have their roots, via Heider, in Brunswik's theories of visual perception. According to Brunswik, the perceiving organism must integrate the highly variable cues given in proximal stimulation (e.g., size and brightness) in order to make inferences about the relatively unchanging distal object which gave rise to them. Similarly, according to Heider, the attributing organism must integrate the cues given in overt behavior in order to make "inferences" about the more stable factors which gave rise to or caused that behavior. Some attribution theories - like Schachter's theory of emotions - deal with people's inferences regarding the

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causes of their own behavior - that is self perception or actor attribution. Some, like Jones & Davis (1965) theory, deal with inferences regarding the causes of other people's behavior, other-perception or observer attribution. And others, like Kelley's (1967 & 1973) theory and Bem's (1967) theory deal with both self perception and other perception. There are other differences as well among the various theories of attribution which are found in the current social psychology literature, but I think it can be said of all of them that in one way or another they deal with the question of the locus of causal attribution for a given behavior: is it seen as caused by personal characteristics of the actor - internal causes - or is it seen as caused by characteristics of the stimulus environment confronting the actor - external causes. What I would like to discuss today are some differences between the locus of actors' causal attributions for their own behavior and observers' attributions for the same behavior.

Jones & Nisbett have recently catalogued a good deal of evidence for their proposition that there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements - that is to external causes, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions of the actor--that is to internal causes. Let me just briefly mention some findings which support their contention and then I'd like to move on to consider the factors which they postulate to contribute to this actor-observer difference as well as some implications which this difference has for psycho-

logical theory. McArthur (1970) recruited subjects to participate in a survey about their interpersonal relationships and then asked them why they had agreed to participate. These subjects were more likely to attribute their behavior to external causes - the value of the survey - than to internal causes--their disposition to take part in surveys. Observers, on the other hand, who read an account of the actors behavior and the circumstances surrounding it, were more likely to attribute the actor's behavior to his personal disposition than to external causes. Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek (1973) found similar actor-observer differences in the explanations given for a college student's volunteering to serve as a weekend hostess for a university function. Observers were more likely than the volunteers themselves to attribute the behavior to a general internal disposition to volunteer. This was evidenced by observers' greater expectation for the actor to show similar volunteering behavior in the future. Other studies by Nisbett et. al. in a slightly different vein, provide further evidence for the Jones & Nisbett proposition. Subjects' explanations for why they like the girl they dated most regularly and why they had chosen their college major attributed these behaviors primarily to external causes--namely characteristics of their girlfriend or their major. However, when asked why their best friend liked his girlfriend or had chosen his major, they attributed these behaviors primarily to internal causes--namely characteristics of their best friend.

It seems then that, in a number of instances, actors' causal explanations for their own behavior are Skinnerian in flavor whereas observers' explanations have a personologist cast. Jones & Nisbett discuss two main factors which may contribute to this actor-observer difference: (1) differences in the information which is available to the actor and the observer; for example, the actor has direct knowledge of his intentions and of his feeling states while performing the action, whereas the observer does not. Thus the actor may be more likely than the observer to attribute his own behavior to external causes because he knows it was unintentional or because he knows that he didn't enjoy doing it, whereas the observer is ignorant of these facts. The actor also has information about his own history which is lacking to the observer. In Kelley's 1967 terminology, this information would be labeled "distinctiveness information"--how does the actor behave toward other stimuli? -- and "consistency information" -- how does the actor behave toward this stimulus on other occasions? Given this information, the actor may be more likely than the observer to attribute his behavior to external causes because he knows it is distinctive or because he knows it is not consistent whereas the observer does not know this. What the observer may know better than the actor is how the actors' behavior toward the stimulus compares with that of other people, since he at least knows how it compares with his own. This information is called "consensus information" in Kelley's terminology. And, given this information, the observer may be more likely than the actor to attribute the actor's behavior to internal causes inasmuch as the

observer may know that it is different from his own behavior whereas the actor is ignorant of this fact. In addition to postulating that there are differences in the information which is available to actors and observers, Jones and Nisbett propose that there are (2) differences in the salience of that information which is available to both.

According to Jones & Nisbett, the action itself--its topography, rhythm, style, and content--is more salient to the observer than to the actor largely because the observer is in a better position to see it. The actor, on the other hand, is more likely than the observer to focus his attention, not on his own behavior, but on the environmental stimuli surrounding it. These attentional differences, according to Jones & Nisbett, result in corresponding attributional differences. Observers, whose focal point is the actor, attribute his behavior to internal causes. Actors, whose focal point is environmental stimuli, attribute their behavior to these external causes. To return to Brunswik's terminology for a moment, it seems that Jones & Nisbett are proposing that the effective proximal stimuli--that is the stimuli which are in fact integrated to arrive at a causal attribution--are different for the actor and the observer. This particular actor-observer difference is to me the most interesting of the two because I think it has the most implications for psychologists beliefs about the causes of behavior. Although attribution theory is often described as the study of naive psychology--the study of the layman's beliefs about the causes of behavior--the professional psychologists beliefs about the causes of behavior

certainly cannot be exempt from all its tenets. It might be argued that the motivational factors influencing observers' attributions can be overcome by the truly objective observer which psychologists claim to - or at least hope to - be. Similarly, one might argue that observer information deficits may in large part be overcome by the psychologist who takes the time to get to know the intentions, feelings, and past history of his client or subject very thoroughly. But differences in the salience of the information which consequently becomes available to both the observer psychologist and his patient or his subject have not routinely been ameliorated by the psychologist practicing his profession. Now I don't want to get embroiled in the question of who is right about the causes of behavior because there will undoubtedly be occasions when each is right. What I do want to consider are the conditions under which psychologists' inferences about the causes of behavior may be particularly vulnerable to observer attributional biases--or, in Heider's terminology, the conditions under which the actors behavior is likely to "engulf the observer psychologists stimulus field."

Trait theory may be a case in point. Personality theorists have long sought to identify the broad internal dispositions which cause behavior. Yet, Walter Mischel has recently pointed out quite convincingly that the belief in internal traits as stable dispositions which cause a wide variety of behaviors is not really warranted by the existing research evidence. Perhaps one reason for the persistence of psychologists beliefs in broad personality traits despite

evidence to the contrary is the tendency for psychologists, like other observers of behavior, to attend more to the actors' behavior than to his stimulus environment and thus to perceive the causes of behavior as resting within the actor.

Personality theorists aren't the only psychologists whose causal assumptions may have been biased by the salience of behavior. Even social psychologists who are explicitly trained to look for environmental causes of behavior have long worried about why behavior doesn't seem to be regularly influenced by one internal cause--namely attitudes. In pondering this question, some, like myself, have proposed moderator variables. I labeled mine a "doer" or "activist" self-concept -- another internal cause and perhaps another manifestation of observer attributional bias! Even attribution theory itself has reflected the tendency to attribute behavior more to internal than to external causes. Actor-observer differences in causal attribution have generally been attributed to such internal causes as differing motives, needs, and wishes of the actor and the observer. The Jones and Nisbett analysis is rare in its consideration of some environmental factors which contribute to these actor-observer differences.

I should make it clear that I do not mean to propose that personality traits and attitudes and motives are <u>not</u> causes of behavior. I'm only suggesting that, as psychologists, we should be especially wary of our assumptions about these internal causes of behavior because these assumptions may in part derive from observer attributional

biases. As Mischel said in his recent Psych. Review paper the question becomes not "do traits really exist?" but "when are trait constructs invoked and what are their uses and misuses?" I would like to suggest a corollary to Jones & Nisbett's proposition which bears on this question. Given Jones & Nisbett's proposition that the salience of the behavior for the observer results in a propensity for attributing it to internal causes, it seems reasonable to propose that the more salient the actor and his behavior are in contrast to the environment, the greater will be the observers tendency to attribute that behavior to internal causes -- and thus the greater the risk of misusing trait constructs. Consistent with this corollary is the observation that psychologists' attributions of behavior to internal causes do seem to vary with the salience of the behavior in question. The very novel and thus very salient behavior of a "psychotic" seems to be more often attributed to internal causes than is the less novel and thus less salient behavior of a "neurotic" which, in turn, is more often attributed to internal causes than the less obtrusive behavior of a "normal." An example of this tendency is found in Alker's (1972) suggestion that for severely disturbed individuals, personal dispositions - i. e., traits - can explain behavior, whereas for normals, situational factors may be important as causal agents. The existence of many more biochemical and genetic theories of psychotic behavior than of neurotic behavior echoes Alker's suggestion that severely disturbed behavior is more

likely to be internally caused. Whether or not this is so is of course an empirical question which I'm not personally equipped to answer. I would simply like to suggest that observer attributional biases might be sufficient to give rise to such an hypothesis inasmuch as psychotic behavior is usually more salient than neurotic or normal behavior.

My suggestion that the more salient the actor and his behavior are the greater will be the observer's tendency to attribute it to internal causes also has relevance for theorizing about the causes of normal behavior. Behaviors which are particularly salient because, for example, the actor's physical appearance is very striking, may be more often attributed to internal causes than the same behaviors emanating from actors with a less obtrusive appearance. This might account for folk psychology tenets such as "fat people are jolly" or "redheads have bad tempers." Displays of joy by the obese or temper by redheads may have been more often attributed to internal causes simply because the relatively novel appearance of these individuals rendered their behavior more salient than the same behavior on the part of others. It would be interesting to examine the folk psychology of different cultures to determine whether traits are more often attributed to people whose physical appearance is in some way atypical for that culture. If my reasoning is correct, then Irish Folk psychology shouldn't make assertions about the temperament of redheads.

The notion that observer attributional bias will vary directly with the salience of the actor and his behavior can also be extended to explanations for individual differences in behavior. Such differences should be more readily attributed to internal causes the more dissimilar the individuals in question are in their overt appearance or style of action. Thus male-female differences in behavior may be more readily attributed to "sex" than sibling differences in behavior are to "birth order" simply because sex differences among actors are more visibly salient than birth order differences and thus tend more to "engulf the observer's visual field." Similarly, behavioral differences between a black person and a white person may be attributed to internal causes such as different personality traits or different biological makeup more readily than are the same differences between a first born and a later born simply because the black person and white person look more different and thus render less salient the stimulus environments which may in fact be responsible for their different behaviors.

Thus far my discussion of actor-observer attribution differences has focused on circumstances which aggravate the observers basic tendency to weight the vivid sensory data of the actor's behavior more heavily than that of the actor's environment. I'd like to turn now to a consideration of those circumstances which might ameliorate this tendency. One would expect that the tendency for "behavior to engulf the field" and yield attribution to internal

causes would be weaker the less salient the behavior is, and there is some data to suggest that this is so. McArthur (1972) found that observers' tendency to attribute an actors behavior more to personal characteristics of the actor than to stimulus characteristics of the actors environment interacted with the nature of the actor's behavior. In this study, observers were asked to make causal attributions for various behaviors which had been classified into two categories in other research: (1) manifest behaviors, which had been defined as behaviors which are directly observable and relatively delimited in time and (2) subjective behaviors, which had been defined as relatively enduring and not directly observable behaviors. Some examples of manifest behaviors were tripping over someone's feet and contributing money to an auto-safety fund. Examples of subjective behaviors were fearing a dog and believing a teacher to be unfair. The results showed that while observers were more likely to attribute manifest behaviors to internal than external causes, the reverse was true for subjective behaviors which were more likely to be attributed to external than internal causes, even by observers. It seems then that when the behavior is not very salient--as when it is a subjective behavior with few motor manifestations--the observers' tendency to attribute it to the actor's disposition will be diminished or even reversed. One might expect that increasing the salience of the actor's environment for the observer would have similar effects. Thus if the stimulus

environment facing the actor were either very novel or if it were brought to the observer's attention by someone, this should reduce the observers' tendency to make internal attributions. A recent study by Storms (1973) has very nicely demonstrated that this is so. Two actors engaged in a brief unstructured conversation while two observers looked on and attributions of the actors behavior to external, situational causes vs. internal, dispositional causes were then compared. As would be expected, observers attributed the actor's behavior relatively more to internal causes than the actors did. However, when environmental cues were made salient to the observers and behavioral cues were made salient to the actors, just the reverse occurred. Observers who viewed a videotape depicting the conversation from the actor's point of view prior to making their attributions, attributed the actors behavior relatively more to external, situational causes than did actors who had seen the conversation from the observers point of view. It thus appears that increasing the salience of the actor's environment for the observer will result in observers making more external attributions for the actor's behavior. Given this finding it would seem important to investigate the conditions under which the actor's environment will in fact be more salient for the observer. I would expect that observers who anticipate being in the actors shoes at some future time would attend more closely to the actor's environment than observers who have no such anticipations. Also, observers who are similar to the actor on various dimensions may be more prone to see things

from the actor's viewpoint than observers who are dissimilar to the actor. One other factor which may affect the salience of the actor's environment of the observer is the cognitive style of the observer. One might expect observers who are field dependent to be more likely than field independent observers to attend to the actor's stimulus environment as well as to his behavior. Similarly, one might expect observers who believe in the external control of behavior to attend more the actor's stimulus environment than those who believe in the internal control of behavior. There is in fact some evidence that this is so. Borden & Hendrick (1973) found that when Ss were asked to infer the attitude of a stimulus person who had taken an unpopular position in a written essay, external control Ss were more influenced than interanl control Ss by the monetary incentives offered to the stimulus person for writing the essay. Thus for "external" individuals, behavior was not as likely to engulf the field as it was for "internals."

Although I have been discussing some of the factors which will affect an observer's tendency to attribute actions to stable personal dispositions, there are of course parallel factors which will affect the actor's tendency to attribute his actions to situational requirements. I have focused on the former because I think it is most important for psychologists, as observers of behavior, to become aware of the ways in which the differential salience of behavioral and environmental cues might affect our own theorizing about the causes of behavior. What I hope my discussion has suggested

is that

(1) Both clinical and research psychologists who attribute atypical or abnormal behavior to internal causes such as traits or biochemical anomalies or defenses should examine their assumptions carefully in an attempt to ensure that the salience of the behaviors which they're dealing with has not masked important external causes of it.

(2) Both clinical and research psychologists whose work brings them into contact with individuals whose physical appearance is in some way outstanding need to be especially cautious about inferring that the behavior of these individuals is internally caused.

(3) Psychologists who theorize about the causes of various overt behaviors probably need to be more vigilant about attending to the environmental variables affecting those behaviors than do psychologists investigating the causes of less obtrusive, covert behaviors.

(4) Psychologists who are in some way similar to their patients or subjects or who are field dependent or who believe in the external control of behavior may have more empathy if one defines empathy as seeing things from another persons point of view. Such individuals may consequently make better therapists...they may even make better

theoreticians to the extent that they are more in touch with all of the causal forces impinging on the actor.

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